

Smart TEACHERS™

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A Worthy Challenge

Want to give your students a challenging assignment that may turn out to be one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives? Want to help them learn something about their neighbors, their community, their history, their ancestry, their value system? What if your students got so involved in exploring their past that it began to impact and shape their present and their future by giving them a better understanding of the community network to which they belong? What if, as a result of this assignment, the students suddenly comprehended and took seriously their ties and responsibilities to their community? What if they found a hero, a heroine, a mentor, someone they wanted to emulate, someone whose story gave them new goals and aspirations—new reasons to steer clear of the dangers of alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and violence?

In a recent book entitled *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: Tryon Publishing Co., Inc., 2000), thirty students from Grundy High School descended on their community to interview their elders. With the help of well-known author and Grundy native Lee Smith, who serves as their editor, and Debbie Raines, long-time Grundy High English

teacher, the students spent two years developing this model oral history project that is a call to action for every community. The result of their diligence is a written record of Grundy's history—some thirty-nine interviews, nine essays, and over one hundred forty photographs.

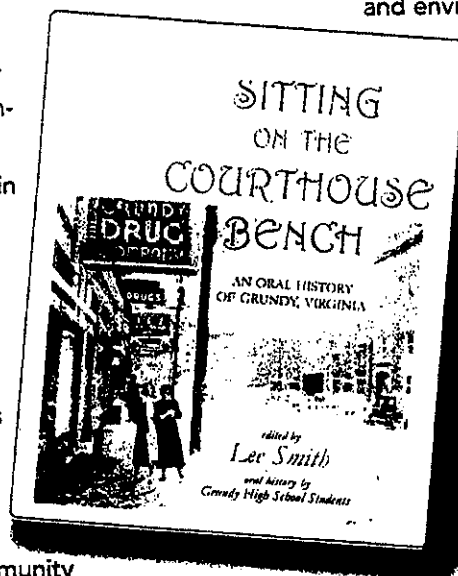
As the book points out, "the history of a community is often contained only in the collective memory of its people. When those people are gone, the history vanishes with them."

The town of Grundy, a small rural community located on the banks of the Levisa River in the far western mountains of Virginia, has faced an uncertain future for many years. It has endured major flooding nine times since 1929. In the flood of 1977, ninety percent of Grundy's businesses were devastated. Every citizen has at least one flood story to tell, and the town is now being forced to relocate to higher ground. Before any further changes...and losses...take place, the students, their teacher, and their edi-

tor were galvanized to make a written record of Grundy's past based on the words and recollections of its oldest and most knowledgeable inhabitants. In the process, the students met and talked personally with the numerous heroes and heroines of their community, and they learned teamwork, how to conduct an interview, how to listen and assemble an oral history, how to chronicle a past and envision a future. They

became young historians with an acute awareness of their roots.

They have even become teachers, providing in their book an appendix, entitled "An Oral History Primer," that provides interviewing tips, sample questions, and a sample release form.



Wouldn't it be exciting to give your students an unforgettable assignment—a reason to sit down, talk with, and listen to their elders, an opportunity to learn something new about their community, an appreciation for their elders and their experiences, and a desire to capture and preserve all that has gone before?